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F Is for Phony



Fake Documentary and Truth's Undoing

Alexandra Juhasz and Jesse Lerner, Editors



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STEVE ANDERSON

[5] *The Past in Ruins: Postmodern Politics
and the Fake History Film*

Concern for authenticity links forger and documentary filmmaker—both create an illusion of the real through an elaborate web of artifice.

:: Jesse Lerner, *Ruins* (1999)

Since the late 1970s, theorists of historiography have challenged the assumption that the goal of history writing should be the progressive assembling of “larger historical truths” into grand libraries of fact and interpretation.¹ Hayden White’s influential writings on narrative and historiography claim that the work of the historian has never been merely the transliteration of a preexistent past into a documentary medium. Rather, he argues, history is fundamentally constituted through the emplotment of historical data into recognizable narratives and literary tropes.² Although White’s intervention initially proved more readily assimilable in the emerging field of cultural studies than within history proper, his privileging of narrative marked a significant challenge to the empirical pretensions of much academic history.³

In spite of its reputation for conservatism and discursive sobriety, the discipline of history is far from monolithic. Ongoing challenges to historical research and writing protocols have resulted in a highly diverse and dynamically self-conscious array of competing methodologies. However, until the early 1990s, it was a rare historian who was willing to consider seriously the significance of film as a discrete and fully articulated form of historiographical practice. Arguably, the tropic convergence of history and literature described by White ultimately proved agreeable to historians in contrast with the greater threat posed by the dramatic spectacle of the history film. Hollywood’s historical epics were—and, for that matter, still are—known for their factual inaccuracies, character composites, and elisions of historical complexity in favor of plot-friendly contrivances

centered on personality, conflict resolution, and romance. Although the value of historical filmmaking is often presumed to be its ability to bring the past "to life," a certain dishonesty attends historical narratives that undertake to present the past as an experience that may be recaptured, relived, or represented.⁴ Put bluntly, the most interesting histories are those in which the past is fundamentally understood as a field of discursive and political struggle—a text that is open to revision and debate rather than one that delivers comfortable narrative closure.

Nonetheless, most literary and cinematic histories remain guilty of obscuring the "discontinuity, disruption and chaos"⁵ of the past in favor of well-plotted narratives. The solution lies not in a retreat into more detached or objective forms, but in the complication and elaboration of existing narrative or documentary strategies. Indeed, Dominick LaCapra argues that no record of historical events, whether a personal diary or a documentary newsreel, should be considered free of its own historical consciousness. Even the most neutral among these is always "textually processed before any given historian comes to it."⁶ If we consider the basic condition of historiography to be an ongoing process of cultural struggle, then we must look for meaning beyond the "footnotes, bibliography, and other scholarly apparatus"⁷ of professional historians, to the way historical evidence is culturally processed, disseminated, and remembered. Although debates continue, mainstream historical scholarship has come to recognize the importance of film in mediating historical consciousness in American culture.

The resulting subdiscipline of "film and history" has carved a small but vibrant niche within academia. Beginning in 1971 with the founding of the specialty journal, *Film and History*, the past three decades have witnessed a proliferation of associations, publications, and conferences devoted to media and history. In 1978, the TV miniseries *Roots* became the most popular television event, and arguably the most powerful historiographical moment, of its time.⁸ Throughout the 1980s, seminal works on film and history by Pierre Sorlin⁹ and Marc Ferro¹⁰ were translated into English, and even mainstream journals such as the *American Historical Review* introduced film reviews as a regular feature. The 1990s, in turn, witnessed a veritable explosion of book publications on the subject, with contributions from both well-known historians and film scholars alike.¹¹

Perhaps the most influential and widely published figure in this movement was historian Robert Rosenstone, who, as recently as 1993, was justified in declaring himself the first to articulate the specific characteristics of historical films rather than simply to treat them as a visual adjunct to written history. Rosenstone went on to break ranks with his

more conservative colleagues to focus attention on a number of films and videos that he regarded as examples of "postmodern history." According to Rosenstone, postmodern history "tests the boundaries of what we can say about the past and how we can say it, points to the limitations of conventional historical form, suggests new ways to envision the past, and alters our sense of what it is."¹² Rosenstone limited his analysis to films that share the desire to "deal seriously with the relationship between past and present"¹³ as defined by more conventional modes of history. The representational strategies mobilized by postmodern history are, he claimed, "full of small fictions used, at best, to create larger historical 'truths,' truths that can be judged only by examining the extent to which they engage the arguments and 'truths' of our existing historical knowledge on any given topic."¹⁴ Rosenstone essentially made the argument that certain films and videos may be considered works of history because they try (with varying degrees of success) to do the same things that *real* historians do. Postmodern histories, though unorthodox, may be recuperated to the extent that they point to histories that are verifiable through traditional means. Thus, ironically, Rosenstone reinscribed these film and video texts that he labeled "postmodern" into a thoroughly modernist (rational, empirical) historical epistemology.

In spite of these limitations, Rosenstone's intervention marked a turning point in discussions of film and history, which had previously focused on questions of factual accuracy in large-scale historical epics. At the same time, theories of postmodernism that were once firmly predicated on assertions about the "loss of history" gave way to the troubling admission that in order to be "lost," history would first have to be "found." Within cultural studies, more sophisticated models for understanding cultural memory emerged in response to experiments with radical history¹⁵ and the redefining of popular memory by Michel Foucault and others.¹⁶ The "culture of amnesia" associated with unreconstructed theories of television was gradually replaced with a notion of history and memory as fundamentally "entangled" with popular media, rather than antithetical to it.¹⁷ By the early 1990s, proclamations about "the end of history" following the collapse of the Soviet Union revealed themselves as cynical prevarications when what Francis Fukuyama called the "triumph of liberal democracy and capitalism"¹⁸ led to an unprecedented (and still unresolved) economic crisis in Eastern Europe. Under the tutelage of Oliver Stone and Fox Mulder, American preoccupations with history came to be dominated by an amalgam of skepticism, conspiracy, and paranoia mixed with furtive, lingering hopes in the reliability of carefully executed, scientific research methods and technology.

In documentary film theory of the 1980s and 1990s, already precarious connections between the real world and systems of representation were aggravated by the introduction and proliferation of digital imaging technologies. The popularity of Errol Morris's *The Thin Blue Line* (1988) revived once scorned strategies of recreation and simulation in historical documentaries. Soon after the Rodney King verdict put the final nail in the coffin of visual positivism, the ontological status of images as historical evidence reached an all-time low, and a renewed critical attention to ideas such as "performativity" necessitated a revision of Bill Nichols's venerable taxonomy of documentary modes.¹⁹ With increasing access to personal computers and the Internet, databases and digital archives emerged as the primary means of storing, organizing, and disseminating historical information. The logic of the search engine, with its enabling of nonlinear and nonteleological narratives, began motivating more varied kinds of historical storytelling, resulting in a profusion of counternarratives, fantastic histories with multiple or uncertain endings, and alternative histories constructed from the point of view of traditionally disenfranchised or voiceless peoples. However, even the most hyperbolic of these works, such as the Recombinant History Project's artificial intelligence apparatus, *Terminal Time*, which generates infinitely customizable historical documentaries, rarely sought to undermine the grounds of historical understanding. Even in the midst of a culture of paranoia, the desire for coherent, historical narratives that rationalize the present remains powerfully seductive.

In popular culture, postmodernism's predilection for perpetual presentness resulted in well-known sublimations of the persistent desire for history into endless varieties of kitsch, pastiche, and nostalgia. However, new modes of cinematic historiography emerged most actively from the other end of the high/low culture divide. In his 1984 article, "An Avant-Garde for the 80s," Paul Willemsen described the goal of the avant-garde in the 1980s as (paraphrasing Godard) "cinema which doesn't just ask the questions of cinema historically, but asks the questions of history cinematically."²⁰ A few years later, Paul Arthur concurred, noting that, since the 1970s, the American avant-garde had been "increasingly infused with a historicizing energy" that represented a break with the previous thirty years of deliberate and insistent ahistoricism.²¹ Both Willemsen and Arthur viewed this "turn to history" in conjunction with a revitalized sense of political relevance in avant-garde filmmaking. Nearly two decades later, the revision and politicization of history and memory remain frequent obsessions among experimental filmmakers. The most interesting of these undertake an interrogation not only of the strategies of authentication

deployed by documentary filmmaking, but the material and epistemological premises of history itself. The latter part of this essay investigates the range of possibilities that have come under investigation in the sphere of experimental documentary filmmaking, and looks in depth at an example of a “fake” historical documentary, Jesse Lerner’s *Ruins*.

► **The Real in the Fake: Jesse Lerner’s *Ruins***

It is a truism of postmodern culture that the difference between truth and fiction is not what it used to be. But in Jesse Lerner’s *Ruins*, this is more than an empty slogan: it’s a point of departure. *Ruins* is a self-proclaimed “fake documentary” that exposes the persistence of colonialist ideology in prehispanic histories of Mexico and calls into question the processes by which the disciplines of archaeology and art history are constituted. In *Ruins*, Lerner is as much concerned with historiography—the processes of writing history—as with history itself. The film mobilizes a multiplicity of historiographical and documentary strategies, ranging from archival footage compilation and hidden camera interviews to cutout animation and fictional recreation. *Ruins* puts forward a scathing revelation of the racist and colonialist underpinnings of ancient Mesoamerican historiography and offers in its place an enlightened critique and alternate vision of the region’s past. The film succeeds brilliantly in snatching Mexican history from the jaws of colonialist discourse, while simultaneously interrogating the conventions of authenticity and authority in the historical documentary.

Ruins is constructed in three movements. The first poses the basic questions of Mesoamerican historiography, debunking both the colonialist naiveté of nineteenth-century accounts and the arrogance of the “definitive” archaeological histories written in the 1920s and 1930s. The second part of the film illustrates what is at stake in the history of this region, and the ongoing instrumentalization of Mexican history in the interests of growing U.S. internationalism during World War II, followed by tourism and other corporate incarnations of Manifest Destiny. The final movement consists of a sustained meditation on questions of originality, authenticity, and competing discourses of art and culture, as refracted through the practice of forgery. The film’s visual syntax is a blend of American avant-garde and essayistic documentary, combining strategies of found-footage collage with a handheld, home-movie vernacular. The structure of *Ruins* is fundamentally intertextual, referencing other historical texts as well as fiction films, advertisements, music, newsreels, and



Ruins (Jesse Lerner, 1999)

Hollywood feature films. Audiences must work to make meaning out of the diverse juxtapositions and layers of historical revision embedded in the film, a process that is consistent with the film's implicit critique of dramatic narrative historiography.

The opening sequence in *Ruins* presages the film's pedagogical intent. Title cards identify the setting as the Yucatan Peninsula in 1931, where Sylvanus G. Morley, a somewhat legendary figure in Maya archaeology, is teaching a Maya woman to speak English. The young woman, dressed in traditional Maya garb, stands in front of a pyramid and phonetically pronounces the words "We are dressed as our ancestors were, who lived here in peace and contentment seven hundred years ago." The scene ends with a somewhat awkward bow toward the camera, followed by another title card announcing the film to be a "Fake Documentary." The next shot is a pan from the ancient Maya pyramids of El Rey to the pyramid-shaped hotels of contemporary Cancún. This opening sequence functions as a metaphor for the historiographical strategies of the entire film. Past and present are dialogically imbricated in relations of space, time, language, and ideology. To truly understand the past, one must first grapple both with the desires of the present and with the awkward mechanisms through which historical discourse is rendered.

Following this preamble, a feature-film-style credit sequence introduces each of the film's major "characters," thereby announcing one of Lerner's guiding ambiguities—the fluidity of fact and fiction in terms of performance, evidence, and documentation. *Ruins*' "elaborate web of artifice" begins with a sequence of crude, cutout animations, accompanied by voice-over narration from several nineteenth-century histories of Mexico and Central America. The animations depict events for which no documentary record exists—the expropriation of ancient Mexican objects and their installation in North American and European art museums.²² The animations are accompanied by inconclusive speculations on the origins of the Maya people (with theories ranging from the lost tribe of Israel to Vikings and Pygmies). These histories attempt to reconcile the reputed savagery of Maya rituals with the magnificence of this people's architectural and artistic accomplishments. A final voice-over admits that, in the absence of definitive evidence, all historians can rely on is "probabilities and conjectures"—while, on-screen, the pages of a history book are systematically shredded, another metaphoric rendering of the historical revision that will be enacted in the film.

Ruins borrows its overall rhetorical strategy from postcolonial theory to highlight the power relations implicit in the gaze of ethnographers and in the cultural narratives that are their stock in trade. The film implicitly argues that the act of viewing and theorizing "primitive" cultures cannot take place outside the paradigms of colonialist ideology. And the film argues that appropriating the past to render it in a coherent, linear narrative is equivalent to the cultural appropriation undertaken by the colonizer. By labeling the film a "fake," Lerner distances himself from the problematic histories of visual anthropology and ethnographic filmmaking. *Ruins* proceeds to mobilize discourses of documentary accuracy and historical authenticity along divergent trajectories, a destabilizing gesture that leads to a reflexive questioning of the filmmaker's own process. Interestingly, Lerner's disruption of the fact/fiction binary is only a temporary rhetorical strategy that allows him to distinguish his project from the outmoded pedantry of the racist predecessors seen in the film, while eventually coming around to articulate his own revision of the historical record. In spite of repeated proclamations that the film is a "fake," by the end of *Ruins*, a senile old history has essentially been replaced with a smarter, newer one. The difference is that *Ruins* functions as an open rather than a closed text—a text that suggests fissures and contradictions in its own argument and ultimately stretches beyond the critique of historiography to pose an indictment of tourism, colonialism, ethnography, and documentary itself.

The story told in *Ruins* is dispersed into a multiplicity of voices, some are linked to on-screen characters and texts while others are presented as disembodied fragments, quotations, recreations, and fakes. Lerner's role as filmmaker thus comes to resemble that of a ventriloquist rather than a unifying consciousness.²³ Indeed, Lerner speaks from a position of omniscience only in rare moments, through the voice of a female narrator who ruminates on the similarities between documentary and forgery, and occasional inter-titles that remind viewers they are watching a "fake documentary" made in 1999. In the latter half of the film, *Ruins* becomes increasingly idiosyncratic in the range of voices it presents, eventually quoting figures as disparate as Orson Welles, Margaret Mead, Rod Serling, and Allen Ginsberg. This panoply of voices metaphorically references an associative montage of historical consciousness and creates a web of textual connections and collisions. Lerner thus establishes a contract with the viewer that is based not on the belief that he is presenting reliable information, but on a tacit agreement to collectively investigate and draw meaning from a range of historical perspectives, images, artifacts, and documents.

The first and last sections of the film are anchored by contemporary interviews with two individuals representing opposite ends of the spectrum of historical authenticity. The first interview is with a woman named María Elena Pat, who is identified as an eyewitness to the mid-twentieth-century excavation of Maya cities by archaeologists Sylvanus G. Morley and Eric Thompson. Speaking to the camera, Pat refutes and ridicules the accepted histories of Maya culture, arguing that Morley and Thompson fundamentally misunderstood Maya language, culture, and politics. Pat speaks as a cultural insider but also as a well-informed critic of Morley and Thompson's outmoded research methods. Her monologue is intercut with archival footage of Morley and Thompson presenting their theories as well-established archaeological facts. In juxtaposition with Pat's critique, however, Morley and Thompson's once authoritative accounts appear preposterously speculative and transparently rooted in projections of their own cultural anxieties.

Interestingly, however, Pat's analysis is not simply presented as an unproblematic correction of the historical record. To undermine the authority of her (somewhat unlikely) testimony, Lerner positions Pat against a rear-projection screen on which appears a series of images by Laura Gilpin depicting scenes of Maya civilization. This strategy²⁴ lends a highly constructed, performative feel to the interview, suggesting that Pat's testimony

may be as much of an artificial construct—a potential fake—as everything else in the film. This layering of discourses of authenticity and artifice underscores *Ruins*' operating premise that the past is accessible only through accumulated layers of historical sedimentation²⁵ and competing interpretation. Historical consciousness, as Walter Benjamin argued, does not move forward through "homogenous, empty time."²⁶ The nonlinear structure and contradictory discursive strategies of *Ruins* function as a metaphor for historical sedimentation and the need to sift through layers of evidence and interpretation to understand both the past and the construction of history.

In the latter part of the film, Lerner's interest in the relation between reality and artifice is most clearly embodied in the heroic, but ultimately tragic, figure of the forger. *Ruins* tells the story of an art forger named Brigido Lara who, in the 1960s and 1970s, reputedly created thousands of sculptures that came to define the art of the Totonac culture, a pre-Aztec society in Mexico's Gulf Coast region. Lara's forgeries were so convincing that many were sold to museums as ancient artifacts and Lara was arrested and temporarily jailed as a looter (rather than a forger) of antiquities. Many of Lara's pieces are now in New York's Metropolitan Museum of Art and other high-profile collections—an unintentional joke at the expense of connoisseurs of "primitive" art. In one remarkable sequence, Lara looks at images of his own work in a coffee table book called *Masterpieces of Primitive Art* and proudly presents some of his sculptures to the camera, caressing them lovingly while the narrator ruminates on the nature of forgeries. Are they "worthless embarrassments or treasured pieces of art?"

Unlike the clearly staged interview with Pat, Lara is shot vérité-style, on location in his studio and in the field as he meticulously seeks out exactly the right kind of clay, tools, and conditions for creating his sculptures. Lara tells the story of his life as a forger in an earnest voice-over, noting that, although his intention was not to deceive, his work has significantly shaped museums' definitions of authenticity. Lara is ultimately unapologetic about his role in the falsification of Totonac history, remarking simply, "It's their problem if they were fooled. I suppose it is a healthy experience." Like Lerner's film, Lara's forgeries transcend the presumed limitations of their inauthentic origins. What is under investigation is not simply questions of truth vs. fiction, but the institutions of authority and authenticity exemplified by the art museum and its self-perpetuating—sometimes self-serving—curatorial practices. Expanding beyond questions of historical value and authenticity, *Ruins* thus articulates a withering indictment of the art world's systems of authority and its claims to cultural relevance.

The latter part of *Ruins* also presents etymological exegeses of words such as "reproduction" and "replica," distinguishing them from "forgeries"

by their relation to deception and their embeddedness in the power dynamics of cultural appropriation. The trade in replicas and reproductions (presented as an important part of the tourism industry in contemporary Mexico) operates through a tacit agreement between buyer and seller that the objects offer primarily symbolic or sentimental value. By contrast, the collecting of original artifacts by wealthy foreigners (including Nelson Rockefeller, whose private plane was reputedly so heavily laden with Maya sculptures that on one occasion it was unable to take off) constituted a clear gesture of economic and cultural exploitation. The irony that an unknown percentage of the artifacts collected under these circumstances were forgeries is not lost on Lerner, who positions this fact among other discourses of resistance and tactical response to U.S. cultural hegemony. In what appears to be a hidden-camera interview, a replica seller insightfully theorizes that U.S. residents are interested in the indigenous cultures of Mexico because the former are a nation of immigrants with no real history of their own. This fleetingly incisive moment of nonexpert analysis throws into relief the convolutions and pretenses of academicized history and its endless revisions.

In *Ruins*, the overt parallels between the art forger and the documentary filmmaker suggest that fiction and artifice may come closer to “staging the real” than to the faithful reproduction of documentary facts. The film argues implicitly that histories that are not subject to revision and debate are thereby drained of their dynamism and cultural relevance. More, static histories are removed from the arena of politics, where meaning is formed in relation to the needs of the present and desires to transform the future. The conception of historiography deployed in *Ruins* does not simply recover or preserve a factual history, but actively engages in the conflicts and uncertainty of the past. Historians should not understand themselves to be constrained by the impossibility of total historical preservation. Rather, *Ruins* demonstrates, they may be equally freed by this apparent shortcoming to construct a relationship with the past that is imperfect and improvisational, and to understand “history” as constituted through multiple voices and cascading layers of meaning.

It is axiomatic to this discussion that most commercial history films have asked too little of their audiences, presumed too little knowledge and sophistication, and offered too little in the way of insight and relevance about the past. Most Hollywood films, to put it bluntly, construct their audiences primarily as consumers—both in the obvious economic sense and ideologically—as the generators of predetermined emotional responses: receptacles and spectators rather than producers, actors, or agents of history. As films like *Ruins* show, the first step toward a more sophisticated

conception of historiography lies not in reforming narrative cinema's historical epics or the unapologetic empiricism practiced on the History Channel. Those who care about the construction and dissemination of history on film should begin by articulating strategies of counter-reading for the histories most deeply embedded in contemporary society. And, perhaps most important, they must cultivate an awareness of long-marginalized experiments with historiographical form so as to come to recognize the potential for a politically engaged, postmodern historiography.

NOTES

1. See Robert Rosenstone, *Visions of the Past: The Challenge of Film to Our Idea of History* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1995).
2. See Hayden White, *Tropics of Discourse: Essays in Cultural Criticism* (Baltimore, Md.: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1978).
3. Of course, debates over the relationship between fact and fiction in historiography are much older than that. In Western universities, the discipline of history was not fully articulated until the early nineteenth century, concurrent with, and in response to, the rise of the historical novel. See Leo Braudy, *Narrative Form in History and Fiction: Hume, Fielding, and Gibbon* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1970).
4. Rosenstone, *Visions of the Past*, 3.
5. White, *Tropics of Discourse*, 50.
6. Dominick LaCapra, *History and Criticism* (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 1985), 34–35.
7. Robert Rosenstone, *Revisioning History: Film and the Construction of a New Past* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1995), 11.
8. Although the unprecedented commercial success of *Roots* underscored the power of both historical fiction and televisual history, critical attention remained focused disproportionately on film, as opposed to television.
9. Pierre Sorlin, *The Film in History: Restaging the Past* (Ottawa: Barnes and Noble, 1980).
10. Marc Ferro, *Cinema and History* (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 1988).
11. See, for example, Robert Brent Toplin, *History by Hollywood: The Use and Abuse of the American Past* (1996); Peter C. Rollins, *Hollywood as Historian: American Film in a Cultural Context* (1983); Rosenstone, *Visions of the Past*; George MacDonald Fraser, *The Hollywood History of the World: From "One Million Years B.C." to "Apocalypse Now"* (1988); Vivian Sobchack, *Persistence of His-*
12. Rosenstone, *Revisioning History*.
13. *Ibid.*, 3.
14. *Ibid.*
15. This is evidenced in the legacies of "history from below" and oral history movements of the 1960s and 1970s.
16. See, for example, Michael Bommers and Patrick Wright, "The Public and the Past," in *Making Histories*, ed. Richard Johnson et al. (London: Anchor, 1982).
17. See Marita Sturken, *Tangled Memories: The Vietnam War, the AIDS Epidemic, and the Politics of Remembering* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1997).
18. Francis Fukuyama, *The End of History and the Last Man* (New York: Avon, 1992), 44.
19. See Bill Nichols, *Blurred Boundaries: Questions of Meaning in Contemporary Culture* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1994).
20. Paul Willemen, "An Avant-Garde for the 80s," *Frameworks* 24 (Spring 1982): 68.
21. Paul Arthur, "The Four Last Things," in *The End of Cinema as We Know It*, ed. Jon Lewis (New York: New York University Press, 2002), 342.
22. The "exhibition" depicted in the animation is loosely based on William Bullock's display of Aztec objects at the Egyptian Hall in London in 1824, a display that included a live Indian, a facsimile of the Codex Boturini, and a possibly fake stone serpent. For more background on this exhibition,

see Ian Graham's essay, "Three Early Collectors in Mesoamerica" in *Collecting the pre-Columbian Past*, ed. Elisabeth H. Boone (Washington: Dumbarton Oaks, 1993).

23. This authorial dispersion stands in contrast with comparable works such as Cheryl Dunye's *Watermelon Woman* (1997) and Marlon Fuentes's *Bontoc Eulogy* (1997), in both of which the filmmaker appears as an on-screen character and provides a focal point of the narrative.

24. This sequence is reminiscent of the rear-

projection performance sequence in Straub and Huillet's *The Chronicle of Anna Magdalena Bach* (1969).

25. This idea of historical sedimentation is developed in George Lipsitz, *Time Passages: Collective Memory and American Popular Culture* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1990).

26. Walter Benjamin, "Theses on the Philosophy of History," in *Illuminations*, ed. Hannah Arendt (New York: Schocken, 1985).